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Asymmetries of Leadership: Agency, Response and Reason

**Leah Tomkins,
Jean Hartley and Alexandra Bristow**

The Open University, UK

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Abstract

Drawing on empirical data from an action research project in policing, we propose that the power relations of leadership unfold in asymmetries of agency, response and reason: Leaders both expect and experience more responsibility than control; more blame than praise; and interpretations of failure - both their own and others' - based more on personal fault than on situational or task complexity. We focus, therefore, on power asymmetry not in the sense of structural inequality between leaders and followers, but rather, as constellations of incongruity, imbalance and unevenness which circumscribe leaders' actions, choices, relationships and feelings about their work. From this perspective, privilege and disadvantage are not polar opposites reflecting the powerful versus the powerless; instead, they are intimately interwoven within leadership experience. The asymmetries of police leadership involve an intermingling of the necessary and the impossible; a decoupling of failure from irresponsibility; resilience at the prospect of being blamed for success as readily as for failure; and containment of society's unresolved crises of responsibility, anxiety and risk. We crystallise this as a paradox of transparency and occlusion - of openness and closedness - in which police leaders are scrutinised by, and answerable to, those whom they must also protect, including from having to bear the full burden of knowledge of the dangers of the world. We reflect on the implications of this not just within policing, but for critical understandings of the power of leadership more generally.

Keywords

Leadership; power; responsibility; asymmetry; blame; learning from failure; Levinas; policing

Setting the Scene: A Focus on Asymmetry

The distinguishing feature of Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) is an emphasis on power and, in particular, power asymmetry. If power relations shape and circumscribe what is possible, desirable and legitimate, the notion of asymmetry refers to the various ways in which this happens unevenly, both creating and reflecting patterns of privilege and disadvantage. Collinson (2011, pp.181-182) suggests that critical studies “examine and prioritize power relations and the ways they are reproduced in particular structures, relationships and practices”, and that CLS in particular focuses on how “for good and/or ill, leaders and leadership dynamics (defined here as the shifting, asymmetrical interrelations between leaders, followers and contexts) also exercise significant power and influence over contemporary organizational and societal processes”.

The issue of the asymmetrical relations of leadership has become something of a lightning rod for debate about what it means to ‘be critical’ in contemporary leadership studies (Collinson, 2018; Raelin et al., 2018). Collinson (2018) argues for the crucial importance of highlighting power imbalances between leaders and followers in order to stimulate critical reflection, and of grounding scholarship in a world in which asymmetry *qua* inequality cannot be wished away. Raelin’s discussions of the ‘leaderful’ organization (2011) and ‘leadership-as-practice’ (2016) focus less on relational asymmetry, because they urge us to see beyond distinctions between leaders and followers, and hence - in a sense - beyond asymmetry.

Carroll (in Raelin et al., 2018) reinforces the centrality of power in any critical leadership approach, but reminds us that power and asymmetry are not always synonymous. As she suggests (Raelin et al., 2018, p.378), “power exists in a ceaseless series of mostly conversational choices and openings that present fleeting possibilities to shape, move, or confirm a trajectory. We must concede there is nothing asymmetrical or structural in such power. It is the equivalent of tiny drops of emancipatory choice and not the tsunami of domination”. From this perspective, and recalling conceptualisations of power-to (Haugaard, 2012) and power-with (Salovaara and Bathurst, 2018) as well as power-over, there are many ways in which critical scholars might engage with power and its asymmetries.

Such reflections on relational asymmetry can be placed within a broader arc of debate about the complexities of leadership relations. For instance, both relation and relationship are central to responsible leadership (Pless and Maak, 2011), which sees the challenges of a networked world emerging from interaction with multiple internal and external stakeholders. As Maak and Pless (2006, p.39) suggest, “the greater the need to engage with different stakeholders with

different interests and different values, the more important it becomes for leaders to be able to connect with them and to act both interpersonally and ethically competent in these contexts". In responsible leadership theory, therefore, relationship is conceived in terms of difference, even tension, between individuals and groups of stakeholders with potentially very different interests (Voegtlin, 2016).

The need to negotiate relationships with a broad range of stakeholders, whose influence is unlikely to be equal, and whose needs may never be fully reconcilable, is also a concern for scholars in the realm of public services. Public leadership is strongly collective in nature (Crosby and Bryson, 2018; Ospina, 2017), as leaders are required to work across agencies to model 'joined up thinking' and provide 'end-to-end' service delivery to citizens and other stakeholders. With their emphasis on the inevitable compromises of such collaboration, therefore, debates about public leadership have common ground with both CLS and theories of responsible leadership in their concern for the tensions and imbalances of leadership relations.

As Collinson (2018, p.363) summarises, the central concern of CLS is "asymmetrical power relations and control practices in all their multiple forms". Despite this acknowledgement of *multiple* forms of asymmetry, the most prominent way in which asymmetry has been conceptualised and debated is as an inequality between leaders and followers, which is held to privilege the former and disadvantage the latter. Here, the influence of Critical Management Studies can perhaps most clearly be traced as, for instance, Knights (2009, p.159) suggests that "power in organizations has always been closely associated with inequality whether in terms of class, as for example in the ownership-control debate, or in terms of discrimination regarding age, race, sex, sexuality, religion, or other disadvantages".

However, just as Carroll (in Raelin et al., 2018) reminds us that power manifests in different ways, so we would emphasise that asymmetry does, too. Thus, our focus here is not on asymmetry in leader/follower relations, but rather, on some of the other ways in which power unfolds as asymmetry in the leadership experience, and on the distinctive features and implications of such asymmetries. We explore these in the domain of public services, specifically policing, and consider how they might illuminate the power relations of leadership more generally.

Our analysis is located at the intersection of CLS and key debates within public leadership, responsible leadership and leadership ethics. We take as inspiration the CLS concern for power asymmetry, and relate it to the domain of policing, acknowledging Hartley's (2018) call for more nuanced discussion of power relations in public leadership, and of the challenges for public leaders to make sense of often impossible tensions that such power relations bring forth. This call for more work on leadership sense-making is echoed in the responsible leadership literature (Pless and Maak, 2011), especially in the context of conflicting interests that are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. However, power is rarely the explicit focus of responsible leadership theory, despite acknowledgements of its importance (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2009; Paine, 2006), so such discussions seem ripe for more sustained reflection on the interplay of power asymmetries and responsibility.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we describe the organizational setting for our project, highlighting the ways in which our action research methodology means working in close partnership with the police service in question, and the different types of data that result. We then present three manifestations of asymmetry, using the general notion of 'asymmetry' to capture the experience of things being out of balance or off-kilter, when they might otherwise have been expected or hoped to be more balanced or equivalent. We thereby emphasise that the concept of asymmetry does not refer exclusively to inequalities between leaders and followers, but has a richer potential to suggest other kinds of imbalance, bias or incongruity. We interweave extracts from the data with our theoretical discussion, drawing the threads together by reflecting on what such asymmetries might mean for a critical examination of power in leadership. As we will suggest, there are both commonalities and differentiators between police leadership and leadership in other sectors. Police leadership therefore throws into sharp relief some of the power dynamics that are perhaps less overt, but nevertheless in play, elsewhere. We will crystallise the distinctiveness of police leadership as a paradox of heightened scrutiny and demands for transparency alongside heightened duty to protect and reassure others, i.e., that police leaders' ethical responsibilities involve being both more open and more closed.ⁱ

Context and Methods

We integrate our description of organizational context with issues of methodology because, to our mind, these are intimately intertwined. Our reflections are derived from an action research project (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) at a major city-based police service in the UK. In common with other police organizations, both domestically and internationally, the service in question is adapting to significant changes in society, working to protect and support an increasingly diverse set of communities with often ambiguous boundaries between policing and social services. It is operating in a world in which the media, including social media, have increased the openness and ferocity of criticism directed towards the police. Indeed, the unique remit of the police makes their dilemmas poignant beyond the borders of their sector for, as Hartley et al. (2017) suggest, policing demand is a reflection of the society that the police serve, holding up a mirror on the shifting and sometimes contradictory expectations, hopes, anxieties and desires for the sort of world we wish to inhabit, and the price we are prepared to pay for it.

The remit for our project is to explore practices and understandings of organizational learning, specifically as these emerge in cultural and personal experience, rather than knowledge or information management systems. This anchoring in the topic of organizational learning has been developed and evolved into a concern for several interrelated issues, the most relevant of which here are connections between leadership, learning and the experience of failure. We thereby connect with elaborations of organizational learning as part of the fabric of everyday institutional life (rather than separate from it as in, for example, training) (Brandt and Elkjaer, 2011); which draw out connections between leadership and organizational learning (Vera and Crossan, 2004); and which see learning as intimately entwined with failure and blame (Vince, 2001; Vince and Saleem, 2004). This emphasis fits well with a *Zeitgeist* of increasing emphasis on police professionalism, and sustained and strategic efforts to acknowledge and address the sort of high-profile failures, including corruption, malpractice and other scandals, which dent public confidence in police integrity and expertise (Holdaway, 2017; Punch, 2000).

Developing the ideas for this paper has involved abductive reasoning. From the multiple definitions of abduction (as distinct from deduction and induction) in organizational research (Nenonen et al., 2017), we see abduction as the search for plausible explanations for, and connections between, ideas as they emerge from the data, especially those which are intriguing, unexpected and/or emphasised by our research participants. In concrete terms, the data underpinning this paper came from a research question about understandings of success and failure, without any a-priori reference to power or its asymmetries. The intertwining of

failure, power, asymmetry, responsibility and leadership came increasingly into focus as the work progressed, involving many iterations of data review, analysis and discussion. Abduction in this sense is a dialogue between the a-priori and the emergent; an invitation to be both curious and receptive in working iteratively between conceptual and empirical domains; and especially suitable for collaborative work with practitioners (Nenonen et al., 2017).

This suitability of abduction for collaborative work is crucial, for our work here has involved an ongoing investment in our relationships and conversations of collective sense-making with our police partners. Abduction is thereby more than technique, it is immersion in the ebbs and flows of practice and a commitment to the co-creation of research. Such immersion reflects both the pragmatism and the relational commitment through which we might hope not only to produce, but also to *socialise*, organizational knowledge that is relevant and resonant as well as rigorous (Fendt et al., 2008). We see such immersion as a core characteristic of longitudinal action research, responding to Hartley's (2018, p.212) challenge that there are "limits to how far researchers can understand leadership if they are not situationally and contextually involved...To understand and analyse the nuances of leadership and to be able to reflect on the thousand and one small and large actions which are part of the flow of leadership work requires researchers to be close to or in the action, and over extended periods of time."

Over the past two years we have collected two types of data: formal and more collaborative/ethnographic. The formal component consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with leaders, officers and staff from both the centralised, corporate functions and the front-line of policing, incorporating response units, neighbourhood policing and community support, investigations, and specialist safeguarding functions, including child protection and mental health. These interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and stored securely in an anonymised format. The total number of volunteer interviewees from this strand is 57.

The collaborative/ethnographic strand involves working in close partnership with police leaders, officers and staff to shape and deliver a range of initiatives and events, including board presentations, leadership development events, and the mobilisation and co-facilitation of a new network of 'learning champions'. This work has involved frequent, often weekly, contact and collaboration with the service in question over an extended period of time, and it is hard to express this quality of immersion using the conventions of empirical research. If pressed, however, we would quantify it as an additional 30 participants, with whom we have had regular, i.e., at least monthly, contact, thus lending depth, intimacy and a longitudinal aspect to our data-set. The collaborative/ethnographic data were not audio-recorded (except as part of events which the police recorded for their own purposes). On the whole, recording

would have been unfeasible and uncomfortable given the naturalistic nature of our work together. Instead, we have taken extensive notes throughout this project, both during and immediately after our various meetings and research encounters.

We have used thematic analysis to analyse both sources of qualitative data. This involved looking for themes in the data, and for patterns, interconnections and contrasts between them. Our work is guided more by the principles of idiographic than nomothetic research, that is, we are not looking for statistical probability, generalisability or saturation, but rather, experiential possibility, resonance and impact. If something starts to 'ring true' across several conversations and/or interviews, we follow its lead analytically.

In this paper, we present both data-types in the same way, not differentiating between data collected in interviews and data experienced and reconstructed in collaborative ethnography. This is for two reasons. First, we do not wish to imply that one sort of data is more valuable than the other. Second, we are committed to taking every step possible to anonymise the data and ensure its non-traceability. Given the amount of trust being placed in us by the service in question, and the personal and political sensitivity of the topics we are sometimes discussing, we are very aware of our duty of care towards our research participants. The less we differentiate between formal and naturalistic data, the easier this duty is to discharge.

Across both data sources, our participants represent a wide range of seniorities, from trainee constable through to chief constable. In this paper, we focus in particular on the first-hand accounts of leaders, defined as mainly inspectors and above. Our main point of differentiation between leaders and others is that leaders are those who are responsible for other people's actions - in particular, other people's mistakes - not just their own. However, we do not draw too sharp a line based exclusively on rank, so we have also considered the accounts of some sergeants with responsibility for supervising large numbers of officers and staff.

At this point, we should also say that the kinds of failure to which we refer in this paper are not at the catastrophic level of, say, the deaths at the Hillsborough football stadium or the Jean Charles de Menezes shooting. Rather, the failures that feature here are usually more minor breaches of approved procedure (e.g., in stop and search protocol or taser deployment) or mis-diagnoses of the severity of the situation (whether over- or under-reaction). We are not blind to the fact that bad things do happen on police operations and in police custody suites (and we are mindful of the risk of 'going native' in this kind of long-term immersion in research relationship), but we think it would probably surprise readers of this journal how small an infraction has to be for it to get referred to an internal disciplinary inquiry. It may also interest

readers to know that the vast majority of complaints and allegations of misconduct find that there is no case to answer. However, it can take months, if not years, to get to this point, leaving officers under a cloud of suspicion and usually suspended from their normal duties during this time.

Asymmetries of Leadership

As we outlined above, the grounding of our project in the notion of organizational learning has brought us abductively and collaboratively towards connections between leadership, learning and experiences of failure, including whether and how both organization and individuals learn from failure. In the discussion that follows, we present three particular aspects of these leaders' experiences of asymmetry. These three propositions are not dominant discourses in themselves, but rather, they are the synthesised results of several iterations of data interpretation. Within this context, the asymmetries of leadership unfold in three interrelated ways:

- Asymmetries of agency: Leaders feeling that they have responsibility for much more than they can actually control
- Asymmetries of response: Leaders experiencing and anticipating more blame than praise from other people
- Asymmetries of reason: Leaders encountering explanations for the reasons for failure based more on personal fault than on situational or task complexity

Asymmetries of Agency: More Responsibility than Control

The police leaders in our study have a powerful, global sense of responsibility for whatever happens 'on their watch', wherein 'watch' could mean geographical territory, functional territory or territories of temporality, namely, a particular shift - or indeed, a combination of all three. This is not, however, the same as feeling that the problems that arise can either be attributed to, or averted by, their own actions or decisions. As one chief superintendent explains:

"There's nothing, *literally nothing*, here that can't and won't get laid at my door! And you do feel guilty about what's gone wrong, and you do, you know, really *cringe*, even if it's absolutely nothing to do with me or anything I myself have done, or even could've done. But it's my job to soak all that up so that my officers can just get on with it."

As Ciulla (2018, p.62) suggests, the primary duty of leaders is to take responsibility, but “*taking* responsibility is different from *being* responsible in the sense that a leader may not be personally responsible for doing something or even ordering that something be done”. This distinction lies at the very heart of leadership ethics, for “the most ethically distinctive aspect of being a leader is that leaders receive praise or blame for the good and bad things that happen under their watch - even when they know nothing about them or have nothing to do with them. In these cases, normal notions of agency that include the intent, capacity or causal connection to an action do not always apply” (*ibid*). In other words, when things go wrong, ethical leadership behaviour means taking responsibility for the failure even when it is not one’s own fault. With this analysis, therefore, we connect with scholars calling for more nuanced reflection on the ethics of responsibility, not as another line item on the list of attributes for leaders to develop, but rather, as the experience which crystallises the very leadership endeavour (Ciulla, 2018; Jones, 2014).

In the case of police leaders, we suggest that this distinction between taking responsibility and being responsible - between taking responsibility for failure and being personally at fault - applies *in spades*. These leaders’ sense of responsibility outweighs and looms considerably larger than their sense of control, going to the very core of who they are and what they are there to do. Suggesting that police leaders are not always in full control is emphatically *not* to imply that they are not good leaders, or that they are unworthy of the trust that we, the public, usually place in them; simply that the nature of their remit, and the impossibility of being able to foresee and de-risk everything, means that their experience of Ciulla’s (2018) ‘ethical distinctiveness’ is, we propose, more profoundly asymmetrical than that of leaders in other sectors.

The need to acknowledge and explore leadership in the absence of full control is increasingly recognised across the public services in general (Crosby and Bryson, 2018). For instance, Brookes and Grint (2010, p.8) propose that the demands for (and of) collaboration, coalition and compromise in public leadership challenge us “to think about how we lead when we are not ‘in charge’ ”. In awakening this interest in leadership when one is not ‘in charge’, the literature on public leadership has much to offer the general field of leadership studies, both mainstream and critical; for we would argue that not being - or feeling - fully ‘in charge’ is a much more common experience than is normally acknowledged for leaders across all sectors. It is not any sort of abrogation of responsibility or indication of leader inadequacy; indeed, it may well be precisely the opposite.

Since the consequences of police failure can be so serious, we are especially interested in the relationship between leadership responsibility and failure. For instance, we think it intriguing that scholarly interest in responsible leadership has tended to be triggered by organizational failure, such as the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska, or the demise of Enron, Arthur Andersen and Lehman Brothers (Knights and O’Leary, 2006; Pless and Maak, 2011; Waldman and Galvin, 2008); in other words, by a concern to identify the causes, characteristics and exemplars of *irresponsible* leadership. As Maak and Pless (2006, p.33) suggest, one of the assumptions in discourses of responsible leadership is that leaders’ irresponsibility has created an institutional and societal malaise in which “the ethical fallout has been attributed to personal greed, grandiosity, and an *everything-is-possible* mentality”.

Shifting the focus away from the hysteria of irresponsibility, we suggest that more scholarly attention be directed towards the complexities of responsibility than the much easier and less constructive task of highlighting where it has clearly gone wrong. Thus, we would challenge the suggestion in some of the responsible leadership literature that failure necessarily indicates irresponsibility. In the context of policing, a degree of failure is inevitable. The very presence of policing in society reflects the fact that things go wrong in the world; the police’s dealings with the public are nearly always, and almost by definition, on occasions of trouble or difficulty where something has gone badly which the police are asked to repair, or something is at risk which the police are asked to safeguard. Based on our experiences with police leaders, this intimate, existential, relationship with society’s failures seems to heighten leadership responsibility, not indicate its absence.

For police leaders, the possibility of failure is not simply an add-on or afterthought; it is deeply enmeshed, even normalised, within the leadership experience. One commander describes the day-to-day challenges of police leadership as:

“Business as usual stuff...I’ve decided to do A, I’ve thought about doing B and C. I recognise that if I do A, it could go wrong for me because of X, Y, Z, but if I’d done B, that might have worked, but I thought this was more likely to go wrong...and on balance, I’ve judged all those and I think A... And *every* decision you make could potentially go wrong and you do your best to judge all of that and ultimately you come down with a route to take forward...And accept that that’s the way it is.”

In this context, it is trying to *decouple* failure from responsibility that might be seen as irresponsible, because:

“The more you try and design out anything ever going wrong, the slower and more cumbersome you become and, as a result, more *harm* is done. And trying to find that balance of minimising the harm by being flexible and fluid and fast-moving, while still having sufficient checks and balances that the obvious risks are avoided, and the learning from before is included in your thinking, is actually quite hard.”

In contrast to some of the responsible leadership literature, therefore, failure in policing does not necessarily indicate irresponsibility, but refusing to acknowledge it, or trying to design or proceduralise one’s way out of it, might. This points to the complex, even counterintuitive, relationships between learning, risk and failure, and indeed, to the complexities of responsibility itself. Thus, the ‘ethical distinctiveness’ (Ciulla, 2018) of police leadership calls for careful reflection on the challenges, constraints and contradictions of leader responsibility.

Here we connect with a vibrant strand of research in leadership ethics which draws on philosophy, in particular, that of Levinas (Bevan and Corvellec, 2007; Knights and O’Leary, 2006; Rhodes and Badham, 2018). We agree with Jones (2014) that there could be greater cross-fertilisation between Levinasian scholarship and discussions of responsible leadership which cluster around the more widely accessible work of Maak and Pless (2006), and we hope to be making a small contribution in this direction with our discussion here.

A Levinasian approach to leadership emphasises responsibility as an infinite, limitless duty to the Other (Levinas, 1969). As Knights and O’Leary (2006, p.134) suggest, Levinas’ “ethic of responsibility moves us away from a pre-occupation with the self towards an indeclinable and unlimited responsibility to the Other...driven by an inexhaustive care”. This leaves leaders with an impossible ethical mandate. Leadership responsibility can never be fully discharged or fulfilled, never met with reciprocity or mutuality; in short, it can never be symmetrical *in any sense*, that is, neither between leaders and followers nor between different aspects of the leadership experience, for instance, between effort and reward, or blame and praise. From this perspective, leaders’ experiences of agency and responsibility will necessarily be asymmetrical; however, the asymmetry is *reversed* from the definition with which we began this paper, insofar as a Levinasian ethic of responsibility puts leaders at the infinite mercy of the demands of the world, rather than in charge or control of them (Ciulla et al., 2018). And whilst Levinas’ philosophy is notoriously difficult to navigate, the current enthusiasm for his work in critical and philosophical leadership studies suggests something very significant in the idea of a leadership that is both necessary and impossible (Rhodes and Badham, 2018).

Recognition of asymmetry is thus a central concern in critical and philosophical discussions of leadership responsibility. It is also a theme which has long inspired scholars of the complexities of public organizations and their relationship with society. Hoggett (2006), for instance, suggests that the space of public officialdom is one of profound contradiction and impossibility, such as the tension between justice and fairness for all versus addressing the particular needs of an individual case. This is not an abstract problem; it both constructs and infuses the everyday delivery and experiences of public services, for “it is often at the level of ‘operations’ that unresolved value conflicts are most sharply enacted, public officials and local representatives finding themselves ‘living out’ rather than ‘acting upon’ the contradictions of the complex and diverse society in which they live” (Hoggett, 2006, p.179). We suggest that the business of ‘living out’ the necessary with the impossible goes to the heart of an ethic of responsibility for police leaders.

Asymmetries of Response: More Blame than Praise

A key theme in our analysis concerns the relationship between the blame and praise that police leaders both expect and receive. At first glance, it is easy to assume that blame and praise are effectively two sides of the leadership coin, i.e., that leaders compensate for the blame they receive (fairly or otherwise) with the praise they receive (fairly or otherwise). This is an interesting discussion point in leadership ethics, for a certain symmetry is perhaps implied in the argument (e.g., Gabriel, 2013; Tomkins and Simpson, 2018) that leaders should neither be given all the credit for organizational success nor be handed all the blame for organizational failure.

Our experiences with police leaders, however, suggest that we should rethink the relationship between blame and praise in more asymmetrical terms. An asymmetry of response, in which police leaders both expect and receive far more blame than praise, arises partly because what they *might* be praised for (i.e., ‘success’) is frequently more terrifying than reassuring. By this we mean that operational successes in policing are often ‘near misses’, that is, things not going quite as badly as they might have done. Not surprisingly, therefore, police leaders demonstrate a cautiousness about drawing attention to, or seeking praise for, this kind of ‘success’, that is, such ‘close shaves’.ⁱⁱ In the service in question, narratives of success are both quantitatively and qualitatively different from narratives of failure. Whereas stories of failure are almost always rooted in operational work, official stories of success tend to be grounded in the ceremonial, rather than the operational, for instance, with tales of officers receiving awards or commendations or achieving some goal outside work. Ceremonial ‘good news’ is generally much safer to report, share and celebrate than operational ‘good news’.

Despite great enthusiasm for increased transparency in leadership in general (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Houser et al., 2014), and policing in particular (Jackson, 2015), there is tremendous ambivalence in our data about the desirability of transparency of success. Whilst there is a strong (arguably excessive) relationship between failure and blame, there is a more tenuous and circumspect relationship between success and praise. Thus, whilst police leaders might wish to praise, encourage and motivate both themselves and their officers in ways that are grounded in operational realities, that is, by acknowledging that *considerable skill, effort and care* have often gone into making things ‘not quite as bad as they might have been’, ‘not quite as awful as last time’, or ‘at least not as bad here as in the next local area’, this raises significant issues for the politics of blame. It suggests both the fear and the feasibility of being blamed for success, not just for failure.

That the concept of success in policing is far from straightforward is also suggested in understandings of ‘best practice’, a concept which plays a significant, though mythic, role in discourses of organizational learning. In our data, ‘best’ usually means *safe* (so far), that is, immune (so far) from criticism or censure. Just as ‘success’ often means ‘not as bad as it might have been’, so ‘best’ often means ‘not yet exposed as not-best’. As one inspector explains:

“It goes well and everyone’s, oh, this is really good, this is best practice. Every time you go to an incident, you should [take that particular action] straightaway...But a lot of what we’re calling best practice is only based on the fact that it hasn’t gone wrong. So we keep doing something and it keeps working and, well, no one complains, therefore that’s the right way to do it. That’s best practice. And actually you think, the first or second time you tried that, if that hadn’t gone well, it probably would have been mothballed by now.”

We suggest, therefore, that asymmetries of blame and praise, and their interrelationship with what passes for success, encourage a certain amount of ‘superstitious learning’ (Levitt and March, 1988). Superstitious learning occurs when the subjective experience of learning is reassuring, but the connections between actions and outcomes are fragile, random or even incorrect. This kind of organizational learning thrives when routines are considered ‘best practice’ not because they are demonstrably ‘best’, but because they are associated, however precariously, with the reduction of risk and the avoidance of blame, whether blame-for-failure or blame-for-success.

Whether because of unease about what is praiseworthy, or because of other dynamics of scrutiny and exposure, the spectre of blame exerts more influence over police leaders than the possibility of praise. In this respect, our analysis dovetails with public and political leadership research which emphasises that more leadership efforts go into minimising blame than into claiming credit for success (Weaver, 1986). The literature suggests not only that the public focuses more on what goes badly than on what goes well, in a so-called ‘negativity bias’ (Rozin and Royzman, 2001), but also that their (our) attributions of blame are neither consistent between events (Resodihardjo et al., 2016) nor consistent pre- versus post-event (McGraw et al., 2011). In other words, what attracts praise in one setting might easily attract censure in another, without the situations necessarily being very different; and what elicits approval before-the-fact can rapidly turn into blame after-the-fact. This latter point also extends our understanding of response asymmetry to incorporate an element of hindsight/foresight. Indeed, being at the mercy of ‘the hindsight police’ is precisely how one detective chief inspector summarises the challenges of police leadership:

“In the back of your mind, you’re *always* thinking, if I get this wrong, and someone is shot or stabbed and there’s an IOPC [Independent Office for Police Conduct] review... And we call them the ‘hindsight police’, the IOPC... the impression you’re given and well, I don’t know, The Daily Mail... it’s very much... Why didn’t you do a *fifth* check on his ID card before you arrested him?! And you’re supposed to think of every possible variable when you’re making decisions... You just end up tying yourself in knots because you’re trying to cover everything... Why did you only check his pockets and his bag and his car for weapons, and his wife’s bag and her car, and her wardrobe, and I don’t know, everything?! Why didn’t you *realise* that he’d stashed the knife in his kid’s toy?! Surely it was *obvious* that it was there?!”

In short, the complexities of police leadership relate to the constant pressure of failure and blame, and the ways in which success is fragile, not always safe to acknowledge, and only occasionally connected with the possibility of praise, or even the reassurance of recognition. This comes about not least because of the impossibility of reconciling the demands of, and tensions between, different groups of stakeholders, such as victims and their families, perpetrators and their families, community leaders, regulators, policy-makers, the press, etc. In this, we connect with both responsible leadership theory (Maak and Pless, 2006) and discussions of public leadership (Benington, 2015; Hartley, 2018) in suggesting that police leadership is necessarily about flexing and adapting in the face of conflicting forces, expectations and reactions, both with and against a range of stakeholders with often very different needs and interests (Hartley et al., 2019).

From this perspective, we question the emphasis in some of the police leadership literature on the importance of leaders creating a common vision (cf Pearson-Goff and Herrington, 2013), because this creates the impression of something immutable and monolithic, and suggests a distinction between strategic and operational leadership which is not perhaps as applicable in policing as in other sectors. Instead, we highlight that police leaders' priorities and emphases morph and adapt in the face of almost limitless combinations of factors, risks and possibilities, often at times of great physical, emotional, temporal and political pressure.

Such tensions and irreconcilabilities are not just abstract concerns; they can have a powerful effect on the human beings who have to live with, and lead through, them. Balancing what is right for one's officers, what is right for the community, what is right for the organization, and what is right both procedurally and legally, is a significant leadership challenge. Police leaders are enmeshed in the enactment and embodiment of public value as a *contested* democratic practice (Benington, 2015; Moore, 2013). As one inspector in our study suggests, focusing on any one group of stakeholders at the expense of the others is both necessary and stressful, and involves weighing up different types of hurt and harm, for instance:

"I took the decision to de-arrest the person, on the grounds of it was... it was the right thing to do at the time, in my opinion. The impact it would've had on community tension, and it was just the right thing to do to be fair to the person concerned. But that went against my team, because they think I didn't back the officer up, because my actions have, kind of, almost justified what the community have said...which is quite an uncomfortable position to be in, I have to say, and it was quite stressful. I think the people will come round eventually, but those are the sort of leadership decisions where you are on your own...And it can be quite a lonely place."

Asymmetries of Reason: More Fault than Complexity

In our discussion of asymmetries of blame and praise, we focused on experiences of leaders, but we also suggested that the spectre of blame has a resonance for a broader group of police officers. The challenge for police leaders lies, therefore, not just with their own disproportionate experiences of blame, but also with the difficulties of protecting their officers and staff from a similar disproportionality. In other words, the possibility of being blamed for success as much as for failure is part of a broader cultural blame dynamic, which leaders try to make as tolerable as they can, both for themselves and for their subordinates.

This broader cultural dynamic can also be seen in the asymmetry we now discuss, namely a default assumption that when things go wrong it is because an individual is at fault. Indeed,

one of the most persistent themes in our data is a dominant narrative of 'guilty before innocent'. This has widespread currency and resonance in both formal and informal conversations, both within the service and increasingly with external stakeholders, such as the IOPC. As one chief superintendent puts it:

"We've *got* to change the way we lead. We still think when we look at what went wrong, or where we've made mistakes, we still look first at what individual officers and staff have done...And we make mistakes *all the time*, but we don't yet address it in ways that really and effectively mean it won't happen again. Our first approach is to submit a misconduct form. It's not: how have we created a culture in which that sort of thing is acceptable? Or: what processes and systems do we have in place that've made that possible?"

In countless examples relayed to us, the default interpretation of the reason for failure is one of individual fault. Whether accidentally or deliberately, something that an individual leader or officer has - or has not - done is held to be the root cause of the problem, and surprisingly often referred to internal, and potentially external, misconduct, complaints and disciplinary bodies. Such a tapering of interpretation onto individual fault creates a harsher picture than that found elsewhere in the literature on attributions of responsibility in public life (e.g., Andrews et al., 2006), where there appears to be more space for acknowledgment that things can go wrong through misfortune or mishap, not just through mistake or mismanagement.

Such entrenching of assumptions of fault - and their serious implications for people's careers, livelihoods and well-being - acts as a significant barrier to organizational learning, because it can trap people in an anxious defensiveness which is the opposite of being open to learning (Vince and Saleem, 2004). Assuming that an individual is at fault when it is often more feasible that the complexity or unpredictability of the task is the/a major factor is both unrealistic and unreasonable, but it has widespread cultural currency in policing. It is a considerable challenge for police leaders, who struggle to protect both themselves and their officers from dominant constructions of culpability. For this reason, this asymmetry between assumption of personal fault and acknowledgement of systemic complexity is the area we have focused most on in our recent practice-based discussions and collaborations with the police, and which we now discuss.

Much of our work here has drawn on Edmondson (2011), who suggests that, whilst the rhetoric of learning from failure is compelling, the number of organizations which actually do this successfully is much smaller than this rhetoric implies. Defining failure in terms of "deviation

from expected and desired results”, Cannon and Edmondson (2005, p.300) suggest that a range of individual/psychological, group-level and organizational factors combine to inhibit learning, and warn against overly simplistic criticism of organizations for not always successfully responding to learning opportunities. For Edmondson (2011), the barriers to learning relate to two main issues with understandings of the relationship between failure and fault: First, the different *types* of organizational failure are not well understood; and second, the different *reasons* for failure are often confused.

With the first point, Edmondson (2011) proposes three main types of failure: preventable; complexity-related; and intelligent. Preventable failures are those which should not have happened, and from which the priority learning is how to ensure that they will not happen again. By contrast, complexity-related failures are to be tolerated, because they could probably not have been prevented and something similar may well happen again in the future, irrespective of the quality of efforts that go into trying to avert it, not least because future instances may well contain new and unpredictable elements. As Edmondson (2011) argues, seeing these as ‘bad’ or as the result of individual fault is to misunderstand the nature of the complex systems in which they arise, and any such interpretation is likely to be counterproductive for learning and organizational improvement. Edmondson’s third category is intelligent failures, which might be seen as positively ‘good’, because they provide potentially valuable information in support of innovation. As she proposes (*ibid.*, p.50), a culture of learning and innovation encourages intelligent failures whereby “the right kind of experimentation produces good failures quickly”.

Turning to the different reasons for failure, Edmondson (2011) offers a nine-point scale of deviance; inattention; lack of ability; process inadequacy; task challenge; process complexity; uncertainty; hypothesis testing; and exploratory testing. Complementary to this, and within a specifically public services context, Van de Walle (2016) proposes a distinction between individual mistakes and systemic causes, such as disinterest by policy makers in the complexities of the service in question, or a shortage of resources which creates a chronic imbalance between supply and demand.

Drawing on ideas from both these sources, we have developed a model of the different reasons for failure in the police service in question (table one). This consists of five main reasons for failure - encompassing preventable, complexity-related (which we label tolerable) and intelligent failures - and five organizational responses which would encourage and enable learning from them. We suggest that each of these five reasons will be valid at different times,

and in different cases, i.e., there is no single or permanent 'best position' for the organization or individual leaders to adopt.

[INSERT TABLE ONE HERE]

Given the significance of the politics of blame, we suggest that a core element of police leaders' responsibility is to enact and role-model the flexibility required to differentiate between these different reasons for failure, especially in discriminating between accusations of individual fault and explanations of systemic complexity. This involves developing the resilience and self-restraint to resist displacing one's own anxieties in the face of failure onto others. Such flexibility is needed both when leaders evaluate their own actions and when they evaluate the actions of their officers.

We are highlighting connections between these interpretations of the reasons for failure and the issue of well-being amongst police officers, proposing that well-being involves feeling reasonably secure in the belief that one will not be unjustifiably blamed for things that are not one's personal fault. In other words, both individual and collective well-being is at stake when this asymmetry of reason is allowed to reign unchecked. This framework is proving to be a powerful way of capturing the challenges of leading in a climate where scrutiny is intense, risk is high, failure is inevitable, and individualised attributions of fault are both extremely damaging and, more often than not, unwarranted.

Implications for the Power of Leadership

In this paper, we have argued that power unfolds in asymmetries of agency, response and reason, leaving police leaders with what is, at times, a necessary but impossible ethical mandate. Police leaders both expect and experience more responsibility than control; more blame than praise; and interpretations of failure based more on personal fault than on situational or task complexity. We have proposed that these asymmetries illuminate something of the 'ethical distinctiveness' (Ciulla, 2018) of leadership, reflecting an often uneasy juxtaposition of accountabilities for both the distal and the proximal - for what lies beyond as well as within the scope of direct control.

In contrast to discourses of asymmetry which privilege leaders and disadvantage followers, the aspects of asymmetry that we have explored reveal both the privilege and the disadvantage of leadership. To our mind, disadvantage evolves in an accumulation of disconnects and incompatibilities which create patterns of unevenness, imbalance and stress

in leadership experience. From this perspective, we challenge any assumption that privilege and disadvantage are necessarily opposites, which reflect a structural inequality between those who exercise and those who must yield to power. The police leaders in our study undoubtedly have privilege, but they also have disadvantage, and we think it is important to question assumptions of a privilege/disadvantage polarity if we are to develop a nuanced understanding of the challenges they face and the choices they make.

In highlighting these particular tensions, we emphasise that the imbalances and inequities of institutional life do not just operate *between* groups of people (e.g., between leaders and followers), but *within* individual experiences, too. Thus, we see asymmetry as a 'within-subjects', not just a 'between-subjects', phenomenon. Reconnecting with Collinson's (2011, p.182) locating of CLS in the "shifting, asymmetrical interrelations between leaders, followers and contexts", we argue for the importance of interrelations between *leaders and contexts*, whereby context refers to the myriad ways in which leaders' performances are shaped, circumscribed and internalised, often painfully, by norms of society, institution, culture and discourse.

We suggest that these insights are relevant not just within policing, but also for critical discussions of power relations in leadership more generally. Police leaders experience what may appear to be an extreme case of juxtaposition of different powers, which include those which are defined (i.e., by statute law) and heavily regulated and scrutinised (e.g., by the IOPC and other oversight bodies), and those which are constructed, enabled, contested and curtailed in practice, experience, community and relationship. The police are authorised to deploy power *qua* force and coercion, i.e., they have the legitimacy and the means to compel citizens to comply; but such powers are produced and reproduced within a constantly morphing web of obligation, negotiation, concession and critique. Their experiences throw into sharp relief that power is not a stable or settled phenomenon even when - *especially* when - it is apparently at its most 'non-negotiable'.

These reflections affect how we see the core competences of leaders, not in a reductionist, psychometric sense, but in suggesting how we might work with these dilemmas in practice, both within and beyond the context of policing. For instance, Rhodes and Badham (2018) propose that leadership conversations might focus on what they call 'ethical irony', in which leaders acknowledge the limitations of their own perspective and agency, and accept that leadership means living with, not resolving, the tensions and occasional absurdities of their position. (After all, what could be more absurd than being blamed for success?) This is not some despairing cynicism or disengagement, but rather, a call for more emancipatory

leadership discussions, which “provide relief by eliciting recognition of shared delusions and surfacing dilemmas and tensions experienced in common...[enabling] ethical tensions to be voiced without being neutered through artificial reconciliation” (Rhodes and Badham, 2018, p.87). From this standpoint, leadership development might revolve around acknowledgement of the paradoxes of power, focusing on flexibility, resilience and political astuteness (Hartley et al., 2015), not as Machiavellian machination, but as skilful understanding of what power cannot achieve as well as what it can.

Our focus in this paper is, of course, not the only way in which our data reveal the workings of power. In future work, we will focus on power, discourse and the construction of identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), including how certain constellations of normality create and reflect tensions between the experienced and the ideal self. Whilst we have hinted at some of the identity dynamics of responsibility and resilience, both the macro and the micro politics of such construction seem ripe for further exploration, especially in relation to shifting notions of the ‘ideal police leader’ and the ‘ideal copper’ (Loftus, 2008; Silvestri, 2018). Such an approach would surely be more sceptical about the politics of responsibility than we have been here, especially within the context of neo-liberalism and the implications of discourses of ‘responsibilisation’ (Pykett et al., 2017). A more politicised take on the notion of responsibility might well argue that, with swingeing funding cuts and ever fewer resources, it is extraordinarily expedient that police leaders should have such a strong sense of duty; and that this should trigger our suspicion and political concern, not just our celebration or relief.

Final Reflections and Reflexivities

As Hoggett (2006, p.175) suggests, the public services serve a psycho-political purpose, for “public organizations have to contain much of what is disowned by the society in which they are situated. It follows that the fate of the public official...is to have to contain the unresolved (and often partially suppressed) value conflicts and moral ambivalence of society”. We think this applies with special poignancy in the case of policing, for the police provide a canvas onto which a whole host of hopes, fears, anxieties and desires - both reasonable and unreasonable - can be projected by members of the public, special interest groups, politicians and commentators. With the police, therefore, society has its scapegoat *par excellence* for almost anything that goes wrong in the world.

Thus, even as we *and they* try to surface and moderate the more overt and addressable asymmetries, for instance, by supporting the introduction of different regulatory classifications of failure, there remains a profound and perhaps inescapable psycho-political asymmetry

between the container and the contained. For us, this is crystallised as a paradox of transparency and occlusion - of openness and closedness - in which police leaders are dissected by, and answerable to, those whom they must also shelter, including from having to bear the brunt of knowing the true dangers of the world. The scrutinised must protect; to enable the protected to scrutinise.

As we work with this ethic of responsibility amongst police leaders, we also reflect on our own responsibilities as members of society, and on whether some of this asymmetry should not be challenged. Without suggesting that the police are all angels, or that the mistakes they make should be overlooked, we are questioning our own responsibilities, not simply in terms of the ethics of confidentiality in academic research, but more profoundly, in terms of the ethics of our own role and participation in society. As Van de Walle (2016, p.833) argues, within the public sector in particular, “failure is in the eye of the beholder”. The triggers, justifications and ferocities of accusations of culpability in public life therefore say as much about the beholder as the beheld. Thus, our societal role in reinforcing, or simply permitting, these asymmetries says at least as much about our own unresolved questions of responsibility, agency and risk; our own disowning of what makes us feel uncomfortable; and our own projects of self-protection and self-preservation as it does about the leadership performances of the police.

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Table One: Unpacking Asymmetries of Fault and Complexity

Type of Failure	Reason for Failure		Organizational Response to Failure
Preventable	Deviation	Deliberately and/or recklessly violating rules, instructions or codes of practice.	Corrective and/or disciplinary procedures.
	Inattention	Accidentally violating rules, instructions or codes of practice.	Refreshing of training, briefing and supervision. Also, attempts to understand <i>reasons</i> for inattention, e.g., exhaustion? Shift patterns?
	Lack of Skill or Ability	Not having the requisite capability to avoid failure consistently.	Review of recruitment as well as training, coaching, supervision and support. NB 'capabilities' encompass technological as well as cognitive tools.
Tolerable	Task Complexity or Unpredictability	The job being too inherently complex and unpredictable to be executed failure-free every time. Even if all rules are followed, things may not always turn out well.	Acknowledgement of the impossibility of guaranteeing absence of failure. This does not mean dropping standards because 'it's all too difficult', but understanding that all complex systems have emergent (unpredicted) properties, meaning that not every single scenario can be foreseen and not every risk avoided.
Intelligent	Innovation	There being an appetite for exploration and experimentation, where failures are seen as valuable sources of data.	Encouragement of a culture of 'promising practice', which nudges us away from the rigidity of one-size-fits-all solutions. Possibilities for innovation are collectively debated, so that (individual) innovation does not come full circle and become (individual) deviation.

ⁱ We speculate that this distinctiveness of police leadership - of a paradox of transparency and occlusion - is perhaps shared with other organizations concerned with public security.

ⁱⁱ We are reminded here that the terrorists only have to be lucky once; the security services have to be lucky all the time.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/12/newsid_2531000/2531583.stm